Afterword

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Abstract

This *Afterword* begins with a brief review of various ethical dilemmas faced by the student authors in the prologue and narrative chapters. This is followed by a more detailed discussion of four of the threads running through these chapters and those of the international scholars. Firstly, with regard to the position of the researcher, the advantages of being a cultural and/or institutional insider are balanced by a consideration of potential disadvantages. Secondly, the crucial role of language in second language education research is considered in terms of the need for sensitivity towards the participants' linguistic and cultural backgrounds, and the use of first and second languages, codeswitching and translanguaging. Thirdly, emphasis is placed on the importance of maintaining respect towards the participants and the culture to which they belong; this led to a discussion of obtaining informed consent, and the need to guard against threats to privacy and confidentiality. Fourthly, the editors consider the ultimate goal of ethical research –social justice; this requires researchers to reciprocate the valuable contribution of their participants and to take steps to ensure that the research benefits the participants and indeed their wider community.

Introduction

This final chapter will review key ethical issues discussed by the student narrators in the Prologue and Chapters 1 to 5. The following four chapters in the book approached ethical issues from other angles of vision by scholars within and beyond the field of applied linguistics: reflections of ethical issues encountered by Noor Azam Haji-Othman in the Sultanate of Brunei (Chapter 6); a commentary on Japanese ethical conventions by Masahiro Nochi, a psychologist and qualitative researcher (Chapter 7); a Confucian perspective on ethical research by two Chinese language educators, Ye Han and Xuesong Gao (Chapter 8); and a consideration of distributive justice by Voo Teck Chuan and Alastair Campbell, two ethicists in the biomedical field (Chapter 9). The authors of these later chapters also commented on some of the issues raised in Chapters 1 to 5. From these various perspectives have emerged a number of common themes, four of which will then be discussed: the position of the researcher; the crucial role of language in second language education research; the need for respect; and the central importance of justice and reciprocity. The chapter will conclude with a brief envoi.

Review

It has been made evident throughout this book that the ethical conduct of research is complex. The seven vignettes edited by Burns and McPherson in the Prologue clearly presented many microethical dilemmas faced by novice researchers when attempting, once in the field, to adhere to the macroethical regulations set by their universities. These included

- attempting to apply ethical regulations of the Ethics Committee of an Australian university in diverse linguistic and cultural contexts;
- mediating between the language of their research participants and that of the university where they were enrolled;
- adjusting the research design to meet local circumstances, and then finding that such changes sometimes negatively affected the quality of the data collected;
- encountering difficulty and/or delay in recruiting participants or gaining access through gatekeepers;
- responding to challenges in maintaining privacy and confidentiality;
- realising and resolving the ambiguity of being an insider researcher;
- dealing with emotional frustration when plans did not work out.

Some of the ethical challenges identified by these Australian-based students, and other issues, were developed more fully in the following five case study chapters written by international PhD candidates enrolled in a New Zealand university. Firstly, each of these students needed to understand the regulations of the university's Human Research Ethics (HRE) Committee. This was no easy task for these new research students, despite their academic skills and extremely high standard of spoken and written English. Secondly, they needed to complete the required application form, understanding and using unfamiliar or only recently-acquired concepts and terminology. Thirdly, they were expected to adhere to these regulations when carrying out research in their specific settings, and this was particularly challenging when they were faced with the inevitable variety and unpredictability of human behaviour. These microethical difficulties were compounded when, as was the case in some of these studies, the culture of the research context differed from that of the authorising university. The question constantly arose as to how to apply these regulations with due respect to alternative culturally-sensitive ethical norms, especially when the PhD candidate was working with ethnically and linguistically diverse participants in their own or an alien environment. Despite these difficulties, as Burns and McPherson pointed out in their discussion at the end of the Prologue, "[t]he experience of participating in a demanding procedure to achieve exacting standards of ethical compliance may result in heightened understandings of the importance of ethical research practice."

Attempting to anticipate such challenges, this group of PhD students were encouraged by their New Zealand supervisors to maintain a research journal throughout the course of their projects. It was felt that such journalling would enable them to consider, among other things, ethical issues as they arose before, during and after collecting their data. The extent to which these journals assisted them varied from student to student and from one setting to another, but the consensus was that they proved beneficial in all three phases. Before embarking on their fieldwork, and after applying for and obtaining formal approval from the HRE committee, they carefully considered the ethical implications of what they were proposing to do; in this way, they augmented their understanding of what they had written in the application form. Once in the field, the daily jottings and supplementary journal entries constantly reminded them, amidst the hurly-burly of multi-method data collection, of the need to respect the privacy, confidentiality and interests of their participants, gatekeepers and institutions – and to take into account their own well-being. In these circumstances, ethical decisions and changes in plans had to be made frequently, and often spontaneously. The possibility that they might have made different, possibly better, decisions was revisited once they returned to the university. These *post hoc* reflections, together with the earlier entries, proved invaluable as source material when writing their theses. These journals also, of course, formed the basis of the narratives embedded

in the five case study chapters in this book. It is hoped that these stories from the field will alert readers of this book, especially other PhD students and their supervisors, to the range of dilemmas involved in microethical conduct – and possible ways of dealing with them. It is also hoped that novice researchers will realise the value of keeping a reflective journal during their projects to record their thoughts, feelings and decisions.

The position of the researcher

A common theme running through the narrative chapters related to the positioning of the researcher vis-à-vis their participants – the extent to they were, or were perceived to be, an insider or an outsider in the research setting. For some, such as Nguyen and Sarfraz (Chapters 1 and 4), being an institutional insider made it easier for them to understand the local organisational structure and ethos. However, their insider status gave rise to ethical concerns when boundaries were crossed between being seen by their participants as a colleague or friend, rather than an impartial researcher. Lee (Chapter 2) was perceived by some of her participants' as a broker for their academic learning, a role which she felt would have been be detrimental to the overall aim of her project; nevertheless, she sometimes uneasily provided such help. As a long-standing insider in her workplace, Pu (Chapter 3) had no difficulties in maintaining good rapport with her student participants, but fell out with her manager, partly as a result of her internal conflict between her dual role as teacher-researcher. In Chapter 6, Haji-Othman and Mohammad considered the dilemmas faced by Haji-Othman being perceived as both insider and outsider in the research context in the light of his sensibilities as a Malay-Muslim. They explained how the issues that arose were typical in the specific context due to relatively homogeneous linguistic and religio-cultural norms that obtained in the Sultanate of Brunei. Haji-Othman's positioning can be compared to that of Yaghi (Chapter 5), whose cultural identity was more complicated since, although she and her participants shared similar linguistic and religious perspectives, they came from somewhat different cultural backgrounds. While Haji-Othman was constantly aware of the need to attend to gender and status issues, Yaghi learned to interact comfortably with her female participants, which eased her ability to build rapport and trust with them. The general point to be made is that access to participants, and the mutual relationship and positioning, is a matter of constant implicit, if not explicit, negotiation.

Language in second language education research

The appropriate interpersonal use of language is essential to all qualitative research, and is a constant thread running through all the chapters of this book, being the foundation stone of the dialogue between researchers and their participants. It enables rapport to be established and maintained so that the participants' honest motivations, beliefs and emotions can be elicited, and the researcher's impartiality and trustworthiness can be accepted. Making delicate decisions about language is even more crucial where the research is conducted in different linguistic and cultural contexts, as exemplified in the all five case study chapters. This is even so where both parties share the same linguistic, cultural and religious background. For example, Chapter 6 clearly illustrated the linguistic delicacy needed when Haji-Othman interviewed female participants, or those who regarded him as a person of higher social standing than themselves, or those who felt that his overseas experience had distanced himself from his home background. Constant self-monitoring and editing of lexical choice and paralinguistic features

were required to ensure that he could elicit honest responses to his questions. As Yaghi reported in Chapter 5, she too initially found it difficult to find the right tone to adopt; she shared the same language as her participants but – unlike Haji-Othman – spoke a different variety; on the other hand, Yaghi was helped by the strong tradition of sisterly solidarity inherent in Islam, as indicated by the mutual use of 'sis' (i.e., sister) in their emails. Sarfraz did not discuss gender issues in Chapter 4, although all of her participants were Moslem and five of her six lecturer participants were female. Evidently, she had no difficulty in establishing good relationships with the lecturers; this may have been facilitated by her shared ethnic and religious background, her collegial status and the use of English as a lingua franca which enabled her and her participants to use English as the professional, and possibly neutral, medium of communication. Evidently, her insider status was helpful in gaining the trust of these participants, but she was perhaps less successful with the two more senior (male) participants – the member of the Quality Assurance Committee and course convener – who were uneasy, perhaps distrustful, about their discussions being audio-recorded in their interviews with her.

Nguyen in Chapter 1 also built upon her insider status and shared first language to collect useful data for her study, but even she had to be careful in her use of language with her gatekeepers and senior colleagues. Pu (Chapter 3) was teaching and researching in her own working place with international students who were studying English as a second language; she used her professional expertise to ensure that they understood what she said in the normal course of events. Nevertheless, she had failed to make it clear to potential participants that they should carefully read the letter of information before agreeing to take part in her action research project. This failure raises the issue of obtaining fully informed consent, which will be discussed below. Lee (Chapter 2) was also working with international students, although not as an institutional insider. Unlike most of the other case study authors, she had to decide which language to use in her interviews with participants who shared the same language (Chinese) with her, and opted for English, although there was frequent codeswitching into Mandarin. This decision created difficulties with only one participant, whose command of English was insufficient to fully communicate her ideas, and was disdainful when Lee suggested she should use Chinese. Subsequently, Lee raised the issue of translanguaging: working in one language and thinking in another. In her case, she listened to the recordings of her participants' utterances in Chinese and instantly translated these into English in her transcripts, arguing that to have transcribed directly into *pinyin* or Chinese characters and later translated these into English would have been unnecessarily laborious. Both Yaghi and Nguyen used the same approach: translating directly into English their participants' speech in Arabic and Vietnamese, respectively. Sarfaz and Pu did not need to do this as English was the lingua franca when communicating with their participants. Nevertheless, all of the case study authors were translanguaging in the sense that they were often thinking in a language other than the one they were using to communicate with others. This gave rise to the challenge of converting a concept expressed in a participant's first language accurately into English for the purpose of writing a thesis. Translanguaging is also evident in some of the entries in their reflective journals – notably that by Pu (Chapter 3), who sometimes interspersed her English language journal entries with expressions of frustration in Chinese, her first language. These written reflections importantly served as a vehicle to express, to themselves, their cognitive and emotional reactions, and perhaps facilitated them to consider appropriate ways to communicate their responses.

Respect: Consent, privacy and confidentiality

The considerate use of language may be regarded as a mark of respect for others which, as Nochi says, is essential to build rapport and, according to Haji-Othman and Mohamad, "is of utmost importance, constituting a large part of the Malay cultural system of politeness in human interaction". Although the authors of Chapters 6 and 7 live and work in Brunei and Japan, respectively, their extensive cross-cultural and interdisciplinary experiences in the educational and professional fields have offered them a wider international perspective than one which is specifically Japanese or Malay-Bruneian. Thus their discussions of informed consent provide profound cross-cultural insights. Nochi's point that "the informed consent procedure is by no means self-evident in every culture" is echoed by Han and Gao in Chapter 8, when they wrote that ethical principles such as *li*, respect or ritual propriety, need to be "localised and realised in their specific research context" by following the normative conventions that apply in the specific research setting. Thus, for example, an ethical regulation that requires participants to provide written consent may be culturally perplexing or even offensive, a point specifically made by Haji-Othman and Mohamad; and Sarfraz in Chapter 4 reported that "[i]n Pakistan, asking participants for their signature on a consent form is not a normal practice". Thus, despite what regulations might require, researchers should not, and should not seem to, coerce people to sign their names - a matter considered by all the five case study authors. They each carefully followed the three-stage approach to obtaining consent suggested by Han in Chapter 8: approaching individuals, explaining the information letter in plain terms, and giving prospective participants time to reflect, However, even this - notably in Pu's study, where some students rushed heedlessly into willingness to participate - did not guarantee fully informed consent. Clearly, consent needs to be tactfully negotiated with potential participants, taking into account individual and cultural sensitivities. In such negotiation, to avoid deceiving the prospective participant, the researcher must be truthful, but it is a matter of fine judgement as to how much information to reveal. In some cases, consent may be partial - as was the case in the Sarfraz's study when one of the two senior participants agreed to be interviewed, but not audio-recorded. Thus if there were a dilemma between adherence to ethical regulations and respect for persons, the commentators in this book concur in commending the latter. Ultimately, participants may decide to withdraw completely from the project, which – fortunately - did not occur in any of the five case studies. Therefore, as Nochi pointed out, even when written consent has been obtained, signing off the form is "not the end of the matter" because the topic and design of the research, as well as relationships among researcher and participants, may well change over time, and therefore participants' consent should be regarded as provisional, rather than definite. Being a cultural and institutional insider obviously brings advantages, but the chapters by Pu, Sarfraz and Huong also reveal that this can lead to the possibility of ambiguity and even conflict between the roles of impartial researcher and sympathetic colleague or respectful subordinate.

Respect for research participants also involves safeguarding their privacy and confidentiality, both of which are culturally specific constructs. As Nochi pointed out in his chapter, "the concept of 'privacy' in Japan is still rather different from the concept of 'privacy' in Western countries." Unlike western societies which valorise individual rights, in a collectivist society such as Japan, the concept of 'privacy' was not conventionally applied to regulate interpersonal relationships. It is noteworthy that among the five principles underlying Confucian ethics identified by Han and Gao, privacy and confidentiality were not specified; perhaps these constructs are subsumed under the principles of respect *(li)* and trust *(xin)*. However, neither privacy nor confidentiality can ever be completely guaranteed. It is certainly possible that researchers can, and should, refuse to divulge to others what was said to them by their

participants, as was illustrated in the case studies by Sarfraz and Nguyen. But there are circumstances where privacy cannot be guaranteed; for example, in Chapter 6 when Haji-Othman reported that he had assured his participants' rights to confidentiality, anonymity and privacy. However, to satisfy local cultural norms, "it was agreed to let a third person (often a female relative or friend of the participant) be present in the room", which sometimes led to the informants being distracted as well as the interview itself being overheard – and thus both privacy and confidentiality were breached. Such intervention also occurred in Yaghi's study, at times when she was interviewing her Saudi participants in their own homes. Also, the use of focus group sessions, such as those reported in Chapters 1, 4 and 5, meant that participants would be in a position to know each other's personal information. Of course, this threat to privacy would be mitigated by an individual's decision not to share sensitive personal information with the group, but there was always the possibility that some of the focus group members could afterwards reveal to other people what had been said in the session. As Sarfraz said in Chapter 4, "[a]part from asking them not to do so, there is very little I can do about it and so I cannot fully guarantee it". Some of Lee's participants (Chapter 2) were very reluctant to share with her their interactions with their academic brokers, to the detriment of her data collection. There is a further dimension involved in this issue. However carefully the PhD student tries to disguise the research settings and the anonymity of participants, readers of a thesis, especially those familiar with the researcher's background, will have many clues as to the identity of the people and places concerned. This is particularly acute where, as with all the student authors of the Prologue and case study chapters, they are obliged to submit their theses on an open access website. This may, but should not, deter the thesis-writer from truthfully reporting negative findings and critical interpretations of issues uncovered in the course of the research project. However, in some cases, this may have negative repercussions on the further careers of thesis-writers.

Justice and reciprocity

Appropriate use of language and respectful actions serve to achieve the ultimate goal of ethical research – social justice. Chapter 9 returns the issue of the appropriate ethical conduct of academic research to its regulatory origins in medical research. Teck Chuan and Campbell, both medical ethicists, discussed distributive justice, which they said "is concerned with the equitable distribution of benefits and burdens among research participants and other groups." In particular, they focused on the issue of reciprocity because researchers should feel a sense of obligation towards their participants for the time and help they have given. They pointed out that a challenge for researchers is to determine the proportionate return to participants. Indeed, all the researchers in this volume saw the need to reward their participants, although they sometimes felt uncomfortable about doing so in any tangible form, and wondered what kind of return they could make. For example, Haji-Othman referred to the following statement in the ethical application form completed by his participants: "I understand that I shall not receive any reward for my involvement in this study". This led him to believe that the researcher was "not allowed to offer any reward as it might influence the information given." Similarly, Nguyen thought that it was "impossible for an ethical researcher to offer money, goods, services or prices in exchange for data." Nevertheless, each of them felt a cultural imperative to offer small gifts as tokens of their appreciation. Other case study authors reciprocated in different ways. Pu felt that in return for participating in her action research project, the students would benefit from the extracurricular English tuition she provided in her writing classes. Both Yaghi and Lee wondered if they were crossing ethical boundaries by providing academic help requested by some of their participants. After reflecting in action, they decided to do so in a

limited way seeking - as Teck Chuan and Campbell suggested - the Golden Mean between providing excessive help and refusing to reciprocate at all. This exercise in practical reasoning most likely strengthened rapport with their participants – and facilitated the collection of valuable data. However, as Teck Chuan and Campbell said, reciprocity extends beyond the specific participants to include "other groups"; for example, the idea of justice in both Confucianism *yi* and Islam embraces the responsibilities one holds to the community, to the nation, and to society at large. Thus, in return for being allowed to undertake the projects discussed here, all the authors had the specific intention to benefit the wider professional, academic or social communities in which their studies were undertaken. Huong believed that the insights she had gained from exploring aspects of blended learning could assist the programme designers to refine the innovation. Lee considered that her exploration of academic brokering in practice would be useful to other international students; Pu hoped that her approach to collaborative academic writing could be applied in her own professional setting, as well as that of others; Sarfraz suggested that her facilitation of reflective practice in classroom observation could be usefully adapted in her university, and probably others; and Yaghi hoped that the findings of her study would be of help to other sojourners in New Zealand, especially but not exclusively those from Saudi Arabia. All wanted their theses to contribute to the wider academic community by providing an enhanced academic understanding of the ethical issues they investigated.

Envoi

As Teck Chuan and Campbell have pointed out, "[f]ortunately for the graduate students reporting their projects in this volume, they did have the support of a university community … to keep to their research aims, while maintaining the trust and respect of both their subjects and those who had the power to enable or prevent their research". This community included their university teachers, other PhD students, and of course their supervisors, whose role was essentially a matter of preparing their students to enter the wider academic community of practice. To be accepted as peripheral members, these PhD candidates needed to present and justify their theses according to the required standards. They have critically reviewed relevant literature, shown competence in the collection, analysis and interpretation of data, and sought to make an original contribution to theoretical understanding of their topics. They also shown that, in embracing global ethical principles, they have demonstrated a duty of benevolence towards, consideration for, and empowerment of their participants in the local contexts in which they have conducted their research projects. This has been at the heart of this volume.

At the time they were writing their chapters, the case study authors were preparing to submit their PhD theses for examination; all have now been awarded their doctorates and they are thus acknowledged as accredited members of their academic community. Another step that they have also taken is to engage with the wider discourse community by sharing aspects of their research with the overseas scholars who commented on their work in early drafts. They have since disseminated their work more widely in the publication of this book, and hope thereby to stimulate ongoing conversations among its international academic readership, especially among novice researchers and their supervisors.